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THE STORY OF A FEATHER.

BY DOUGLAS JERROLD.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PRINCE OF WALES EXHIBITED.—THE COUNTESS BLUSHROSE.—DREADFUL ACCIDENT TO MR. FLAMINGO.

I soon discovered that their Majesties George the Third and Queen Charlotte had benevolently consented that their baby should be exhibited to the men and women of England. These tidings had rung like a merry peal of bells throughout London; and on the very morning after my exaltation to the Prince of Wales's coronet, crowds were clustering at the gates of the palace.

Here, however, I must fain confess to a disappointment. Being in the very temple of royality, I at first indulged in the most extravagant expectations of the moral dignity—the uttered wisdom of the high and fortunate people about me. I watched the king's mouth, as a bride gazes on her wedding casket, wraped with an assurance of its contained richness. I followed the motions of the queen, as though, for a time, she had taken leave of the skies, to dazzle and to dignify a benighted plannet. Such were my first emotions: but let me be frank,—they were of brief endurance. I very soon discovered his dread majesty to be a mere man who loved mutton for dinner, and the queen from Paradise, a quiet little woman, with a humillity so marked that it disdained not decimal fractions.

And then there were the lords in waiting—the gentlemen of the bedchamber—the women of the like elysium—and those donmed, fragile dolls and victims of state—God help them!—the maids of honour. In the simplicity of my inexperience, I believed all these people to be of another flesh and blood—to possess a more exquisite anatomy—to be refined by the pure and healthful atmosphere of a court into natures above the sordid influences of this nether sphere; to be, indeed, mid-intelligences between men and angels.—Must I say it? I have found the coarse mind of the merest footman in the lacky peer; and in the lady of the bedchamber, the small envy, the petty heartburning of Molly the chambermaid at the Star and Garter. Alas, too! for the maids of honor!—Hapless images of ceremony—poor, moving anatomies, with eyes that must not wink, tongues that must not speak; and, hardest tyranny of all, with mouths that must not yawn at the dull discipline that consumes them. I have seen them in the royal presence stand on their throbbing feet, until the blood has vanished from their lips; and had I been a fairy wand, I would have changed them straight—have bestowed upon them the paradise of a three-legged stool, with a cow to milk beneath the odour-breathing hawthorn.

If, however, the maids of honor affected my compassion, the ladies inwaiting excited my highest admiration. Here, I thought, are women—doting wives and loving mothers—quitting the serene and holy circle of their own hearths—relinquishing for an appointed term the hapiness and tenderness of home, to endure a glorifying servitude beneath the golden yoke of ceremony. Here, at last, I thought, is self devoiton: here a noble sacrifice to noble objects—here at once the heroism and the true religion of loyalty.

The countess Blushrose was a lady in waiting. Providence had expressly fashioned her for the enobling function. She had some vague notion that there were human creatures—a white race, something higher in the scheme of the world than the mere Hottentot; but it was also a part of her creed that, like horses and oxen, they were sent for no other purpose to this earth, save for that of ministering in any manner to the will and wish of herself, her friends, and her immediate acquaintance. The countess never neglected her religious duties, for she had a pew that Sybarite might have slept in: and, generally once a week seemed to listen to the home-simplicities of the pulpit—of death, and common dust, and common judgement. Nevertheless, it was plain that her ladyship possessed a strength of mind that continued superior to such antique prejudice—hence, to her dying hour, she remained an unconverted hearer. The world, the habitable world, to her was composed of about an area of two miles, with St. James's palace for the centre.—Any part beyond that boundary was, to her, mysterious as the Mogul country; she looked upon it with the intelligence that possessed the theological opponents of Columbus, when he talked of a new continent: allowing it to exist, and to be once reached, there were certain currents that rendered impossible any return from it.—To the Countess Blushrose, nature herself had written *Nec Ultra* on the west side of Temple-Bar.

The countess was allowed to be beautiful as the most beautiful statue: and save in the presence of majesty, viewed all things unbendingly and with a stony gaze. She seemed to make the atmosphere about her cold by her very looks. She rather appeared to be an exquisite piece of machinery—an improvement on Maximilian's wooden dove and iron fly of old—a wonderful work constructed and adorned by the labored ingenuity of man, than a creature warmed by human blood, and sanctified with a human soul. Yet men called her beautiful. Nay, born a baronet's daughter, she had owed her coronet to her creamy cheek and high abstracted gaze. The heart of the Earl of Blushrose had been led away, it would seem, in chains of ice. He had been frozen into matrimony by the spells of a sorceress; and, influenced by his partner, seemed to his old friends never to have recovered his natural heat.

At the time of my elevation to St James' the countess had only one day relieved a sister lady-in-waiting in her exalted ceremonies. At that time, the countess had an infant son—Lord Tootle—in the cradle. She was very fond of it—really, very fond of it; but then she felt such devotion towards the palace. This truth I aftewards learned from a brief incident. The child was born weak and puny. 'Madam,' said the doctor, 'you must nurse this babe yourself.'

'How can you talk so ridiculously, doctor?' said the countess.

'Indeed, your ladyship, I advise only what is necessasy—indispensable,' urged the doctor.

'Necessary! How can I submit to such a tie, when there is the palace to—'

'Well, madam,' said the doctor in conclusion, casting a significant glance at the babe, and then at its mother—'if you do not nurse the child yourself, my word upon it, 'twill die—die, madam—die.'

Whereupon the countess, gently elevating her eyelids, said—and said only—'poor thing!'

I have dwelt thus long upon the character of the Countess Blushrose, as she will be found a somewhat important person in my narrative. Indeed, it was to her that I owe my speedy removal from the palace. But of this in due time—let me not anticipate.

At the opening of this chapter the reader was acquainted with the condescending, intention of their majesties: the Prince of Wales, in his cot or cradle of state, was to be exhibited in bib and tucker to his future liege subjects. Every due precaution had been carried out to prevent the too near approximation of the curious vulgar to the resplendent baby: the rockers sat at the cradle within an inclosure at the end of a state apartment, part of the royal household lined the room, and then, units of the world without were suffered to enter at one door, and walking past the cradle, and casting one look—for a second was scarcely possible—at the majestic infant, werere rapidly conducted out at a door opposite, to the world they had come from; a world they felt themselves henceforth authorized to gladden with tales of the baby prince—of the glories of a palace.

It was curiously insteuctive to watch the beaming countenances of the happy few who, having elbowed it lustily in the crowd outside—who, in the excess of loyality, had thrust and fought their neighbors to catch a look of princely babyhood—now arranged their habits, and tried to conjure serenity to their red and streaming faces. Men and women of nearly all conditions poured along the room, and glanced at that marvelous baby. The only court attire command for the event was decent cleanliness—in very truth (if history be any thing), not always palace wear.

Great was the veneration paid to the prince!—Men whom I afterwards recognized in the world, came to look their homage to the all-excelling infant; men, who with red wine on their table, and their knees at the Christmas fire, would with barred and bolted door hear the starved orphan wail the Christian carol in the frozen street; men, with hearts close as their fobs, felt the said hearts marvellously touched and melted when they looked upon the prince! How deep, how exceeding their sympathy for a baby helplessness hedged about by palace guards,—how beautiful, how touchingly beautiful, is infancy born to dominion whereon "the sun sets not!"

And there were other lookers—honest, simple souls, who with a hurried, almost tearful glance at royality, felt themselves richer for their coming lives. They had seen things called babies before, but the prince was a blessing—a glory in lace, only for the first time vouchsafed to the world.

Some trod the palace floor as though they feared to hear their own breath: had their shoes creaked, it was plain they must have fainted.

Others, again, looked anxiously, fearfully about them as though, like men in an Indian wood, they feared some wild beast, with death in its jaws, to spring out upon them. Many of these—I watched them—never saw the prince at all. They approached the cradle pantingly, but urged on by the attendants, passed it ere they could call up courage to look upon the dazzling glory within.

I was thus contemplating the various characters of the crowd, when I beheld a face I thought not wholly strange to me. After a minute, I recognized the visitor: it was my first acquaintance in England, Shadrach Jacobs, the old Jew of the Minorier.—Having that day washed himself, it was difficult for any one to detect the Hebrew dealer through the strange disguise. Washed, however, he had been—washed, and drest in black and buckles, as though he had been going to court at the New Jerusalem. He hobbled past the cradle, gazing with his raven eye, which kindled sparklingly, but whether at the babe or the lace that half smothered it, I leave to be divined by the genii of Solomon's brazen kettles.

Immediately following the Jew came Miriam, his voluminous daughter. Great was her beauty, but greater still her strength: else how at her ears, her neck, wrists, and fingers, could she have borne the many trophies of her victories bought by sailors' wages out of goldsmith's cases? Miriam was there; but where was Jack Lipscomb? Where was my first English friend? Alas! sick, perilously sick on an outward bound voyage. Poor Jack was in his hammock. No matter. Tom Bracely of the 'Good Intent' went with Miriam to St. James's.

Thus seeing an old acquaintance, my thoughts went to Patty Butler. 'Will she,' I asked myself, 'be here?' Then I looked hopefuly around me. Another minute, and I saw—not Patty—but her snug employer, Mr Flamingo, with Mrs. Flamingo beside him—both gazing about them, joyous as spirits new to paradise. Though Flamingo was loyal to the very nails, his visit was not paid only to the infant prince. No; feathers had something to do at the tradesman's heart, and he came—kindly bringing his wife with him—to behold the exaltation of his ware. I could see him look up at myself and two companions, as if he felt the soul of the prince was there in white plumes, and nowhere else; as if the dignity of the prince would have been naked as a day old sparrow, but for the feathers, which were—in Flamingo's mind its natural clothing.

With these feelings Flamingo approached the cradle, and Flamingo's evil spirit kept close at his skirts.

The Prince of Wales has fallen fast asleep. Flamingo prepares himself to look his homage. He is as close as ceremony permits his advance: when some demon in the air tickles his nostrils, for the leather-merchant stands fixed, throwing his head back, and explodes in the loudest sneeze that ever profaned the roof-tree of a palace.

As Flamingo sneezed, the Prince of Wales, startled by the noise, woke—and waking, roared most lustily. The baby of a bacon-fed ploughman never yelled in higher pitched.

Flamingo was about to pray that the floor would open and swallow him. Ere, however, he could frame his petition, he was hurried to the door by the attendats; further admission was denied to the thronging sight-seers, and for that day (and all owing to the untowardness of a sneeze), the exhibition was concluded.

CHAPTER X.

Am carried off from the palace—the Countess Blushrose and her Chaplain.

Few and brief were my days of glory in the palace. Long ere the Prince of Wales cut his first tooth (what a chapter might be written on the teeth of prince) I was removed from my high, intoxicating place of state; plucked from the coronet. Nevertheless, a splendour still hung about me; I was still enriched by the recollections of the past. I had waved above the slumber and the waking smiles of the Prince of Wales—I had been a type of state and honour—I had been glorified by position—and was, therefore, a relic dear to the associations of those who trod the carpet of a palace as though they walked the odorous turf of Eden. It was to this love, this veneration that I am convinced, I owed my speedy removal from St. James's. Had the Countess Blushrose felt less devotion towards the Prince of Wales, I might for years have remained in the palace; it may be thrown aside to pass into the stomachs of palace moths.—I was, however, doomed to a more various destiny. The Countess Blushrose refined away the vulgarity of mere honesty by the excess of loaylty. A philosopher, or—if he were duly hired for the coarse word—an Old Bailey practitioner, would say the countess stole me.—Well, in hard, iron phrase, she did so; but surely the spirit that prompted her that prompted the felony, made the theft—a divine one! Even the accusing angel must have put his finger to his lip, and inwardly said "Mum!" as the countess, in a flutter of triumph, bore me from palace. How her heart beat—for, snugly concealed under her short satin cloak, I felt the throbbing organ—beat, as the beautiful robber entered her carriage.

I doubt not, there are simple folks who will marvel at this story—nay, it may be, give no belief to it. They may ask—What! a countess filch a feather, when a word in the place would doubtless have made it her lawful chattle? Such a petty pilfering might have been looked for at the hands of Mrs Scott, the princes wet-nurse—of Jane Simpson or Catherine Johnson, rockers—but from Countess Blushrose!"

I confess it: in my inexperince of the world, such were the very thoughts that oppressed me; now it is otherwise. Not without melancholy I own it; but I have found that with some natures it would pain and perplex their moral anatomy to move direct to an object: like snakes, they seem formed to take pleasure in indirect motion; with them the true line of moral beauty is a curve. Had Queen Charlotte herself bestowed me upon the countess, she would not felt as pleased. I arrived at the mansion of the countess, in—Square. A curious adventure greeted me, I may say, at threshold. As her ladyship passed through the hall, she was met by a mild, gentlemanly-looking person. There was a certain meaning in his look—a something significant of disquietude softened and controlled by constitutional calmness. "May I speak some words with your ladyship?" he asked.

"Certainly, Mr Inglewood," answered the countess; and turning into an apartment, she let her cloak drop from her shoulders, cast me upon the table, and then with the voluptuous majesty of Juno, sank upon a chair. "Have you heard how the dear bishop is to-day?" she inquired; and then without waiting for an answer, she continued: "poor man! what he's made of I can't think—mere flesh and blood had never lasted till now." His lordship has been a great sufferer," replied Mr Inglewood; "but to-day he is better."

"But there's no hope—impossible.—He mends; and he mends; but then he breaks and he breaks. That cough of his ought to have killed anybody. Well, Mr Inglewood,"—and here the countess, lifting me from the table, and now idly fanning her cheek with me, and now breathing upon me, and smiling as at her breath I trembled—"well, Mr Inglewood, she said I suppose we must all die."

"Thank God!" was the answer.

"Really, now," asked her ladyship, still waving me to and fro in her white hand, "don't you think this world would be a much prettier place if death never showed his wicked features in it?"

Mr Inglewood gravely shook his head, and then with a gentle smile asked—"Ought we to say wicked, madam?"

"I can't tell—perhaps not; you as a clergyman are bound, you know, to have other opinions. And yet, added her ladyship condescending to glance with brilliant archness at the reverend man,—"and yet, I dare say death, though at times he may be thought a tolerable sort of thing by a curate, is ugly enough—oh, a perfect fright to a bishop."

"I hope not, madam," answered the private chaplain of the countess.

"You have no notion, asked her ladyship who will have the vacant mitre? Very good, Mr Inglewood, by that look of humility I can perceive that mitres make no part of your dreams You are above such vanities."

"In truth, your ladyship, though I'm not of worse stuff than bishops are sometimes made of——"

"Certainly not," interrupted the countess quickly; "I don't see why you should despair. There is the bishop of ——; he was only a chaplain, and taught—what was it?—*hic hoc* to the children. You are certainly as good as he—and then you can swim so well! How luckily it was that brought his lordship's nephew out of the Isis! How strange, now, if some day it should prove that you fished a mitre from a river!" Thus spoke her ladyship to the dependent parson—in a cold, icy tone of banter, that—I could see it—made the man wince as he listened.

"Madam," Inglewood, "I have no such hope; I will add, no such wish.—Contentment—"

——"To be sure!" COTETMENT is the prettiest thing in the world. Oh, it saves people such a deal of trouble. 'Tis an excellent thing—a beautiful invention for the lower orders! and then it's so easy for them to obtain—easy as their own bacan, milk and eggs."

"Very often, Madam, replied Inglewood, with some emphasis; nay, to often, quite as easy."

"But with us, who are constantly troubled with a thousand things, contentment would be as out of place as a gipsy in a court suit. I think, if ever in my life I was to feel perfectly and truly content, I should expire on the instant."

"We pray against sudden death," said Inglewood, solemnly.

"Lud!" cried the countess, startled by her chaplain's tone—"don't name it;—I do most heartily. Don't talk of it—I'd forgot—you had something to say, Mr Inglewood?"

"Will you forgive, me madam, said the chaplain, if presuming on my function, I interfere with matters in this house, as I have been told, not within my duties?"

"Mr Inglewood! cried the countess, with some surprise, throwing me upon the table, "pray go on, sir: as a clergyman, nothing, sir, should be below your interference that—"

"That affects the peace of mind—the happiness of a fellow-creature," added Inglewood.

"Very right, sir; very right: as a Christian minister of the Established Church, nothing less should be expected of you. I have the greatest opinion of your morals. Mr Inglewood—the greatest. I only hope that the earl—for I can perceive, by your manner, that is lordship you are about to speak—"

"Indeed, madam—I—"

The interuption was in vain. The countess, with increasing rapidity of speech—accompanied with gestures that left nothing for the chaplain to do, save to wait with resignation the silence of the talker—continued to repeat her sentiments of confidence in the judgment, vigilance and devotion of the divine, together with hints and suspicions directed at the connubial loyalty of his lordship, towards whom her vanity took the place of love. It was her instant and fixed belief that her chaplain—the man of peace—was about to vindicate his functions by becoming a domestic tell-tale; that he was about to prove himself her faithful friend, by making her the "most wretched woman."

At length—for even the tongue of a vain and jealous woman will stop (an invincible proof of the ending of all moral things)—at length the countess was silent and, throwing herself back in her chair, with deepest devotion of a domestic heroine, was prepared for the worst. She had always felt that she was reserved by fate for something dreadful, and the moment was arrived! The earl was fickle, false and selfish man, and she—sweet martyr to the marriage-service—she, alas! was his wife.

"Madam, said Inglewood, somewhat abashed and confounded by the energy of the countess, were I base enough—but no"—and the chaplain stammered, and his face for a minute flushed—"I have no word to speak of the earl; were there that to say of him which your ladyship's fears—most groundless fears, I am sure—would listen to, it would little suit my place or nature to utter it."

"What does the man mean?" asked the countess. "Did you not say that you had to speak of something that affected happiness and peace of mind—and all that?"

"True, madam," answered Inglewood.

"Well, then—and to whose happiness, to whose peace of mind could you possibly allude, if—"

"Will your ladyship hear me? I will be very brief," said the chaplain, with an inward twinge—a rising of the heart at the selfishness of the beauty before him.

"Oh, say what you like—I suppose I must hear you," answered the countess, again taking me from the table, and pettishly waving me about her.

"A person in your ladyship's has committed a fault—"

"Of course, said the countess—such creatures do nothing else."

"She has proved not trustworthy in the duty confided to her."

"I hear of nothing else, cried the countess, waving me more violent, Let her be be turned away immediately."

"You will pardon me, madam: she was about to be cast from the house—cast out broken-hearted and with a blighted name—when I took on myself to stand between her, and, for what I know, destruction, and to plead her cause before you."

The countess looked at the chaplain impatiently—angrily, and then said, Mr Inglewood, I am sorry for it. I wish you would confine yourself to your duties."

"And what, may it please your ladyship—what are they?" asked the clergyman, with calm voice and fixed look.

'I trust, sir, you know them—to say prayers, and make or read a sermon,' answered the countess.